

Creating Meaningful Spaces for Teaching and Learning

Plenary Speech by Patrick Blessinger

2013 International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Conference

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Good evening and welcome to the 2013 International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Conference! First, I want to thank our conference organizing committee: Charles Wankel, Melody Bowdon, Olga Kovbasyuk, and Agata Stachowicz-Stanusch. I want to thank our keynote speakers, Eric Mazur, Eva Egron-Polak, Dmitry Leontiev, and Lennie Scott-Walker. I would also like to thank President Hitt, Provost Waldrop, Dorothy Loman, Melissa Pompos, Kwok Yin Mak, Brett Morrison, Dominic Campos, all the student volunteers, and many other administrators, faculty, staff, and students at the University of Central Florida who helped to develop many aspects of this conference.

Anyone who has ever helped to organize an international academic conference knows that such an effort requires hundreds of hours of highly coordinated effort from dozens of dedicated people. I feel privileged to be part of that effort and to be part of a wonderful community of educators.

HETL is an organization of educators, by educators, and for educators. HETL supports the principles of democratic governance, pedagogical pluralism, sustainable learning, and freedom of inquiry. HETL is an organization that provides diverse professional development opportunities and networking and collaborative activities for its members.

HETL aims to build vibrant, inclusive, socially conscious, and collegial communities that help faculty, students, administrators, and staff to achieve their professional and personal aspirations. Coincidentally, this month marks the three year anniversary of HETL. Since the inception of HETL, it has supported and nurtured thousands of professional educators. Personally, HETL has provided me with a vehicle to nurture and express my passion and to help make the world a better place. It is my hope that HETL can also be a vehicle for others to nurture their passions and help them achieve their dreams.

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Quality professional and personal relationships are vital in the field of education where everything we do centers around creating meaningful spaces for teaching and learning. Doing so allows us, at a social level, to progress forward by creating new knowledge and new innovations. It also allows us, at an individual level, to expand our consciousness and enlarge our capacity to live happier and more meaningful lives.

Our conference theme, “Exploring Spaces for Learning”, is both an inspirational one and a relevant one. The words *explore* and *space* are words that have multiple dimensions and multiple meanings. In one sense, those words cause me to think about the pioneering efforts that educators engage in to continually push the boundaries of teaching and learning, from the application of cutting-edge technologies in order to create more engaging learning activities, to the application of innovative pedagogies to create more effective teaching practices. In another sense, these words cause me to think about the new spaces we create in order to transform the conditions of the academic environments we work within, from physical classrooms to electronic classrooms to hybrid classrooms.

Over the next few days, as you dialogue with your colleagues, I would like you to reflect on the following questions:

- What calls you to this work?
- Does your work allow you to live out your values and express your authentic self?
- Does your work allow you to fully express your talents and capabilities?
- Does your work allow you to grow and fulfill your dreams and aspirations?
- Does your work allow you to have a positive impact on your students, on your colleagues, and on the world?
- Does your work allow you to experience personal meaning and happiness?

When I reflect on the nature of our profession and the impact we have on our colleagues, our students, and society, I am reminded that it is both an incredible responsibility and an awesome privilege. The nature of our profession requires that we come together collectively to determine how best to move our profession forward and how best to shape it so that we can answer those questions in a positive and life-affirming way.

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As educators, we come from many different places and backgrounds, and the issues and challenges we face are just as diverse and complex. One of our great responsibilities is to help students write their own life stories as they journey through our classrooms. In doing so, we help create learning environments that are dialogical, experiential, authentic, and holistic. Working to achieve that aim is both a tremendous responsibility and a thrilling experience.

Educating the whole person in an authentic way matters a great deal because it is the essence of what being human is about and, after all, education is a highly human and social endeavor. Your presence here reflects the vitality of HETL's mission to be a catalyst for transformative leadership, academic scholarship, and educational development around the world. Judging by the conference program, there should be no doubt that our association's values of integrity, collegiality, and diversity are alive and well. These values are just as much about our past as they are about our future.

In our post-industrial world, the context of higher education in general, and teaching and learning in particular, have become unusually complex and vitally important to our continued survival on this planet. The teaching and learning environment is rapidly changing. With the immense challenges of rising education costs, increasing diversity of all types, increasing globalization in all its forms, increasing use of technologies, and the shifting notions of what it means to teach and learn in the post-industrial era, the future of education is very much in our hands to shape.

In a way we have never seen before, a more democratic and a more social notion of higher education is spreading throughout the world. With the rise of the digital revolution in the mid-1990s, and the rise of an open access and open education philosophies during the last decade, we are experiencing a revolution in the way higher education is becoming more democratic and social in its orientation, and thus, increasingly more accessible to larger segments of society. Presumably, these trends will continue and they will present us with both great challenges and great opportunities.

Today, educators around the world are focused on increasing student engagement by creating more student-centered and meaning-centered learning environments. More and more educators now realize that learning occurs anytime, anywhere, and in multiple ways.

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For instance, learning occurs informally, collaterally, emotionally, socially, and tacitly, and not just cognitively and not just within the boundaries of a physical classroom. So, one major challenge of education is to figure out how to better integrate formal learning with informal learning and how to better integrate cognitive learning with emotional and social learning. We should not shy away from these challenges just because they seem formidable, but rather, we should resolve to collaborate in innovative and imaginative ways that are equal to the challenges.

A better understanding of the nature of learning coupled with the new realities of the digital age and the post-industrial society are causing us to rethink our assumptions about the deeper purposes of education and the aims and methods of teaching. Education is about engaging in critical and creative dialogues; it is about developing a unique personality that is more self-regulating and self-determining – one that acts out of its own volitions - it is about developing an authentic life-world for each person and discovering a meaningful place in the world.

How can we help bring about such an educational space? First, investing in professional development is important. We need to have the confidence to take reasonable risks. We need to create an environment that builds confidence and generates bold new ideas. Our institutional missions and visions and values need to be constructed in such a way that help move us into new modes of inquiry and new ways of thinking.

We must consciously foster the conditions that create environments that are vibrant and meaningful. We must create clear visions of where we want to go and clear value statements that will guide us in how to get there in an ethical manner. We must strive to be resilient and flexible. We must lead with courage and passion.

Are we encouraging curiosity or are we building barriers around our departments and disciplines? Do we actively work with or seek advice from colleagues outside our disciplines? What steps can we take to be empowered and to empower others? Do we actively seek opportunities to network with people of different perspectives and institutions and nationalities?

I encourage you to reflect on these questions as you prepare to dialogue with each other and as you prepare to explore new ways to create more meaningful teaching and learning spaces.

In conclusion, I look forward to meeting all of you over the next few days. Thank you and I wish you a wonderful conference!